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The Academy of Everyday Life— Psychology, hauntology, and psychoanalysis

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In the end, Bret — you were the ghost (Bret Easton Ellis, Lunar Park)

Introduction: The Academization of Everyday Life and the Freudian heritage

In which other then in academic terms would pathology come in these post-modern times? Everyday life is encroached by Academia, and we all have adopted the eager gaze of for example the psy-sciences. Pathology as such passes over the academic discourse. Academization and psychologization even seem the very symptom of our times.

Looking for a genealogical explanation one easily winds up with putting the blame to Sigmund Freud. For his *Psychopathology of everyday life* (1901) seems to be a decisive framework for late-modern man turning the gaze inwards in a psychologizing way. In this key work Freud wrote about forgetting proper names, mistakes in speech and other everyday faulty acts, to which, as the common reading goes, he attributed some deeper psychological meaning. If one is to speak of a gradual colonisation of everyday life, it is clear that Freud as such made an inaugural step. For *Psychopathology of everyday life* had a vast cultural impact: the *oops*, a *Freudian slip of the tongue* is still quite widespread. Although quite paradoxically that exclamation almost invariably means that the speaker is *not* going to engage in understanding his lapse: Freud is exactly invoked to whisk it away. Today in broad Academia, Freudian theory itself is whisked away: Freud's study on the trivial waste products of psychic life is now itself considered wasted time. The alleged deeper meaning is replaced by neurological short-circuits, cognitive processes or just chance events. There is no message or meaning to be looked for: the contemporary cigar always is but a cigar. But does not as a consequence everyday life – as it only now becomes fully colonised by science – also as a whole becomes trivialised? Being in love is being deceived by chemistry and solidarity is a trick of the altruism gene (see for example Bachner-Melman, R. et al., 2005) Note that we are still lured by something, if not any longer by the Freudian unconscious then now by neurotransmitters or the gnome. Presupposing still another scene, the indebtedness to the Freud's "andere Schauplatz" is far greater than mostly admitted.

But contemporary Academia is not really committed to understand the Freudian heritage: "Emotions are brain activity, nothing more, nothing less, the rest are stories." This was the remark I once got from a notorious Flemish Freud basher who, triggered by my references to Freud, Lacan and Žižek, attacked me, with quite a furor, during a public presentation just a few months after I started my PHD. I was rather baffled – the meeting was announced as a friendly and collegial platform for starting PHD-students – and I answered politely that to me stories in themselves constitute a legitimate field of studies. It was only afterwards – it is always afterwards that the good arguments come – that I came to understand that the grip of Academia today is much more total compared to Freud's claim on everyday life and that in this way it is mainstream academia itself which is stuffing everyday life full with stories. For it might be a misunderstanding thinking that Freud was looking for a deeper meaning in the pathology of everyday life, in dreams or in the suffering of his patients as such. One can argue that Freud was more such interested in the subject, in what it meant to be *subjected* to meaning for example. Although the Freudian subject is connected to hermeneutics, coming from both without and within, the subject itself always resurfaces as having nothing to do with all this meaning. The subject is the result, or better, the remainder of all that: in other words, the subject is that almost mythical empty point which is left behind when all the stories are told. In this way the subject is the proverbial dog watching a sick cow. This beautiful Flemish saying originally meant *to watch eagerly something one wants*, but eventually it became to mean *to watch something with bewilderment, being incapable to grasp it or to connect with*. Thus the subject is the asymptotic zero level of meaning; watching for example his own brain activity and believing the rest to be mere stories. It is exactly this disturbing Freudian meaninglessness which today is rejected and which is replaced with mainstream academic stories meant to provide in a total, closed account of the human being, and if the latter today is not yet fully charted, then it will be so in the nearby future. Claiming that all is brain activity is not telling too little, it is telling too much, it is not robbing the subject of meaning, it is overstuffing the subject with stories.

Is it not the meaninglessness as such which consequently comes to haunt us? Consider so-called *random violence* (see for example: Best, 1999) such as freeway shootings, hate crimes and wilding, which worry policy makers, educators and community workers. We could downplay this as a mere media hype playing on the fears of the public and reinterpreting phenomena which always existed but which we did not yet grasp or accounted for. But this of course would be the easy way out. Maybe meaningless violence is not to be linked to our lack in understanding, but rather to be understood as the effect of too much understanding and meaning. Today everyday life is overstuffed with meaning leaving almost no breathing space left: “what you experience, that is called in psychology...”? So the only escape from this straitjacket cannot but come in the dimension of the meaningless. Recall Slavoj Žižek’s skinhead, who repeats the well-known psycho-sociological platitudes on his own situation in front of the camera. He is the prototype of the post-modern academic subject: after the interview – bringing up “diminished social mobility, rising insecurity, the disintegration of paternal authority, the lack of maternal love in his early childhood” – he returns to the mob not in the least hindered by his academically correct self-assertions (Žižek S., 1997).

There is thus a double shift: from Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, to the *academization of everyday life*, and from Freudian symptomatology to academic pathology: the latter finding its most pregnant manifestation in the meaninglessness which is coming to haunt us. If there was ever a missing link between academics psychology (and its still widening praxis) and psychoanalysis it is there, in the hauntology of academic pathology. Jacques Derrida’s coining of hauntology, a near-homonym of ontology, is very relevant here (Derrida, 1993). As Frederic Jameson contends, Derrida’s hauntology is about the living present being scarcely self-sufficient and having a density and solidity which might betray us (Jameson, 1994). Derrida’s hauntology replaces the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost whose intrusion in our world is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks. Time for a short tour in this house of horrors. We will first briefly sketch the role of psychologization, after which we will attempt to situate academization in a historical perspective. This will then lead to an exploration of mainstream academia’s refusal and refuting of the psychic dimension. Finally we will try to outline our *hauntology*, departing from Bret Easton Ellis’ novel *Lunar Park*.



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Reschooling society and psychologization

Let us depart from the fact that the classic typical nightmare of having to do an exam after being long graduated might come closer and closer to contemporary reality. For looking at today's schoolified life world it is clear that in these late-modern times graduating as such is not simple. Sticking to the school benches is no longer the sole business of the so-called *eternal student*, now *lifelong learning* has become the destiny, if not the sentence, for everyone. *Lifelong learning* stems from economics and was first implemented in education. The *knowledge society economics* model (Senge; 1990) was translated into educational terms. As Willinsky puts it: schools had to help students learn valuable skills and knowledge, and to emphasize life-long learning within a restructured job market (Willinsky, 2005: 99). While critics focus mainly on how the close relation of education with economics came wrapped in the garb of creativity, ingenuity and continuous learning (Willinsky, 2005: 100), it has mostly remained unnoticed that this discourse is heavily psychologized. For the first step in celebrating knowledge is to strip it from its content and shift the focus to attitudes and skills and this brought education more and more to the personal and psychological level. In this way, exactly as the employee in the company, the pupils and the students are called upon to put their whole personality on the balance: they became obliged to be emotionally involved. Take for example highly psychologized educational methods like *circle time* claiming to enhance self-esteem and positive behaviour. These methods prompt children to become inner-focused persons, and as Steph Lawler contends, this inner-directedness is exactly a means of conformity to social norms (Lawler, 2008: 65).

The expansionist ideology of life-long learning became not only the guiding principle of the company and the school, but eventually was extended to the whole of society. The

European Commission for example considers evolving to a Learning Society an essential point in their policy to make of Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustained economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.” This should not be understood solely in practical economic terms: life long learning clearly aims objectives at the broad social and individual level:

The Commission’s 2001 Communication *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* and the 2002 Council Resolution on lifelong learning stressed the importance of lifelong learning for competitiveness and employability, but also for social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. (Commission of the European communities, 2006)

So in the same way as in education, generalized life-long learning too is closely connected to psychologization processes. The life-long learning discourse is a highly psychologized discourse, just think of the terminology of *social skills*, *adaptability*, *personal and professional fulfilment* (terms to be found in official papers, see for example The Council of the European Union, 2002). The battery of governmental and non-governmental *psycho-educational* programmes to which the western man is subjected testify of this close relationship: the academization of everyday life is psychologized matter. Do you want to become parent? Take a parenting course. Problems with drugs? Enrol in a rehabilitation course. Sex problems? Consider a master-class. Are we here facing, as Johannes Beck puts it, the threatening prospect of life reconstituted as a series of learning modules (Beck, 1999)? We seem to be condemned to never grow up and remain forever under tutelage. Sometimes the infantilizing stance is breathtakingly blatant. Flanders educational specialist, the psychiatrist Prof. Dr. Adriaenssens^[i] for example links unhesitatingly psychology and sociology to neurology in one simplifying movement. He argues that it is normal for adolescents to engage in black-and-white thinking (sic), considering “how the brains of a teenager function”. A music-choice, becoming a vegetarian fanatic, racist talk ... all this is connected with the fact that “teenager brains [are] not yet fully developed” (Adriaenssens, 2007). It is simple: no fuzz, no stories, it is about brain activity. Equally clear and simple are his words of advice: “Do not say: ‘Just wait and see, you still have to learn a lot!’, but say: ‘You’ve got me perplexed here, I honestly do not know what to think’” (Adriaenssens, 2006). In this way, parents of adolescents will achieve much more according to the expert. Here already the stories come in, stories meant pre-script your life, providing you with your role and your lines. But can you imagine yourself pronouncing those artificial and mannered prefab sentences? Of course the expert anticipated any hesitance on that ground, as Dr. Adriaenssens contends: although today’s generation of parents has not learned to communicate, this can be trained (Adriaenssens, 2006). It is clear, this psycho-social part of Lifelong Learning as it has been fully deployed in the last decades by governmental agencies, the educational system, resource centers, the media etc., is gradually transforming our postmodern habitat, our public sphere and our everyday life in a general and psychologized Academia. But how did we come here?

Modernity’s academic gaze

Historically we owe modern Academia to René Descartes (1596-1650) and his attempt to ground modern subjectivity in the very act of doubting: *I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am*. It is essential to see that from then on *ecce homo* (behold the man) got a reflexive twist; man was solicited to contemplate himself, and there he found a doubting and thus reflexive being. Or in contemporary terms: he found brain activity. However, the gaze

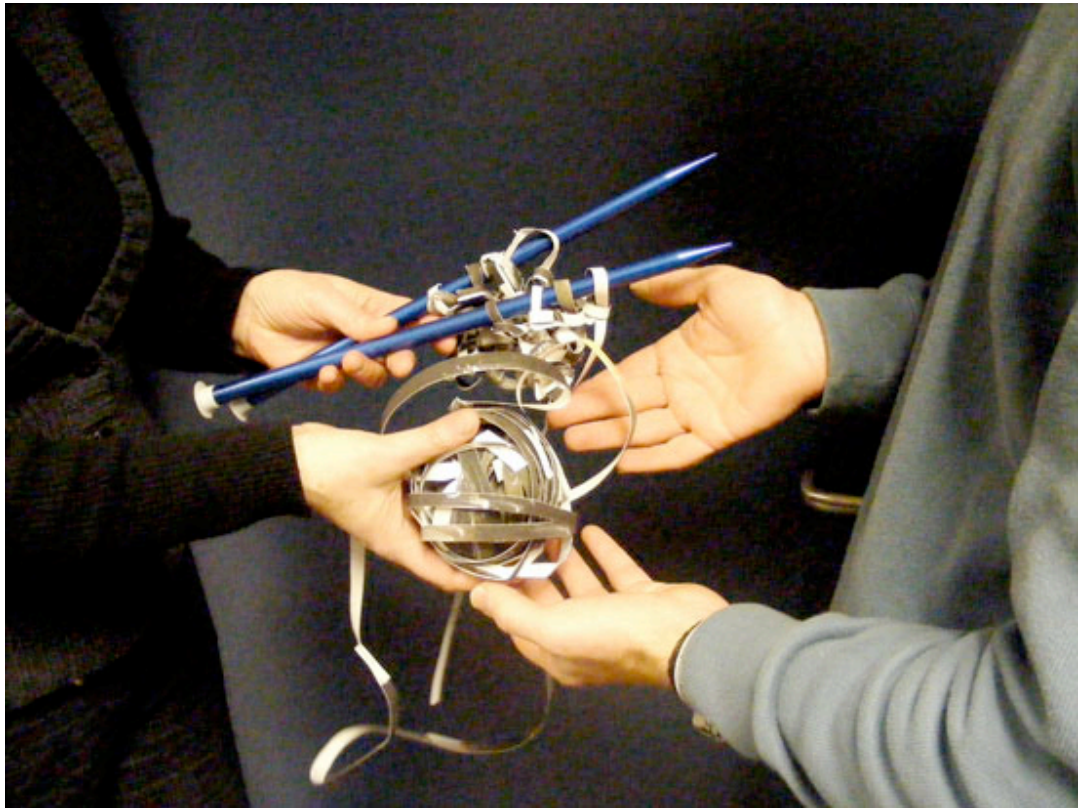
turned inwards of modernity is quite problematical: if I am the one who doubts and thinks, who is then the *I* speaking? I am the *I* who says he is the one who doubts and thinks. But then who is *that I*...? In other terms: who is that *storyteller* always shifting a place? Descartes still relied on God to get a grip on this infinite shifting of the reflective perspective. The Cartesian radical split between *res cogitans*, the thinking agent, and *res extensa*, the outside world, is guaranteed by God: God is acting as the go-between (think of the elaboration by Malebranche).

Later Julien Offray de La Mettrie took up Descartes' problem in such a decisive way that his book *L'homme machine* (Man Machine) of 1747 provided science with a basic paradigm up till today respected. La Mettrie solved Cartesian dualism by denying the *res cogitans* any substance as such: for La Mettrie, all the aspects of the soul (as a free thinking and free willing subject) have to be considered as aspects of the *res extensa*. Man is a machine, thinking, willing, feeling are but bodily reactions and functions: what we call *soul* is something material, observable in the nerves and in the brain. Or, also stories are brain activity! La Mettrie grounded his argument on future research; once our knowledge and techniques will be refined enough to prove that the soul is but the function of the body. A very modern academic stance indeed: just think about the history of ADHD: first denominated Minimal Brain Damage, it became Minimal Brain Dysfunction – because no lesions were found – till finally it became ADHD: solid in its abbreviation of merely behavioral symptoms, it carries in its core the ever postponed promise to find the organic base of this *disturbance* in some undefined future.

La Mettrie's materialism from in the beginning was criticized while it undermines any religious or moral dimension; when man is a machine only the law of nature prevails. But this debate on moral nihilism often misses the central paradox of equaling man to animal as well as to machine. Since in the equation, the question of what man is cannot but persist: even when we would have charted the whole brain and would understand fully the mechanics and chemistry, the image of man would be equally puzzling: man as that strange creature asking the question *who is man* while holding his brains in his hand and contemplating it from all sides. Considering man as a machine-animal cannot but reveal man as that mysterious being who came to look upon himself as a machine-animal. As Marc De Kesel contended, La Mettrie's solution of reducing the *res cogitans* to the *res extensa* left that problematical mythical point – situated beyond *res extensa* – intact: the very point from which man looks upon himself (De Kesel, 2007). La Mettrie made of man a sick cow, but the puzzled (and puzzling) gaze of the dog remained. La Mettrie only made it more clear that the modern, Cartesian subject relates to himself and the world via the academic gaze, and as De Kesel argues, this zero level of subjectivity is also the neutral and objective point that science presupposes when engaging in scientific research (De Kesel, 2007). The modern subject is an academic subject, the unbridgeable gap between himself and the object in the world outside, eventually also bears on himself and on his self-experience. The subject always falls between two chairs.

Maybe it is in this way that we can understand that La Mettrie eventually adopts a seemingly amoral hedonistic stance. In his writing *L'Art de jouir* he says that if you kill a man or rape a woman, it should not bother you, you could not have helped it; so do not let remorse upset you (La Mettrie, 1987). Having reduced the subject to a zero level, and the question of man still persisting, La Mettrie comes up with a very Sadean answer to disavow the gap (the filiation between La Mettrie and Sade was by the way proclaimed by Sade himself). Put bluntly: if man is no more than a machine-animal, then he can only be this in a perverted way; he can only play or mimic the animal driven by nature. La Mettrie covers the zero level of subjectivity up with a sadomasochistic subject. Perversion is a way

to deny the abyss of the human subjectivity, for which as Sade shows us, a body of knowledge, *la philosophie du boudoir*, is needed to enable this enactment (De Sade, 1990). Sade thus reveals how knowledge and academia itself can be structured as a perversion: the dogma of *there is but brain activity* is not an innocent story^[ii]. Modern science's way of handling the question of what is man is fundamentally marked by La Mettrie and De Sade. Consider for example that in our globalised day and age we are flooded with the Sadean prescriptions *Enjoy! Don't Worry, Be Happy* (drink this, buy that). These consumerist *commands to enjoy* are grounded within science. Although today in advertising, the serious, non-ironic use of *the man in the white coat* has almost disappeared (notwithstanding the obvious exceptions of toothpaste or washing powder adds...), the fantasmatic frame of science is easily found in the discursive structure showing how the consumer himself is addressed as a *proto-scientist*, having adopted the scientific gaze to look upon him or herself. For example, *Flora spread* has on its official website next to the home button, three other buttons *know your heart*, *heart healthy living*, *cholesterol advice*: food consuming is for the everyday consumer a scientific informed business. But maybe far more than the medical, the *psychological* discourse is appealed in advertisement. Like Dauntton & Hilton write "it is now something of a duty to explore personal identity through consumption" (Dauntton and Hilton, 2001: 31). L'Oreal's "*Because You're Worth It*", for example directly refers to the self-esteem and self-worth discourse in psychology. Nike's *Be Real, Be You, Be True*, - and, design your own custom shoe - is at the other hand appealing to the authenticity injunction, the (paradoxical) psy-command par excellence. It is crucial to understand that we are not dealing with clever advertisers who use psychology to address our subconscious emotions or hidden drives, no, they directly appeal to the consumers' familiarity with the widespread imagery of psychology, to his own proto-scientific position. It is in this way that we are addressed, not only by consumerism, but also by the medical specialist, the omnipresent psychologist, the social worker, or the teacher (who has to combine all these professions), all bombarding us with stories and instant academic answers serving our insatiable quest for authentic being. The fact that we are that much flooded with answers is maybe what inspired Saramago in his epigraph of his latest novel: *we will know less and less what is a human being* (Saramago, 2008)



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Academia does not want the psyche

The historic heritage we have sketched thus leads directly to our modern habitat coming to resemble a class room with its (basically anti-knowledge) paradigm: it is all brain activity, the rest are stories. This dictum, meant to cover up the frightening abyss of the zero level of subjectivity, furthermore cannot but lead to *a psychology without the psyche*. To illustrate this, let us again depart from the vast – and still expanding sector – of educational and parental support. There, albeit in a totally different sense than Saramago, the experts too are convinced that the problem is a lack of knowledge. At the first glance the argumentation looks sound: for is parental support not an adequate answer to the contemporary parent becoming basically insecure about his or her parenting? Knowledge on education nowadays is not transferred easily between generations. Furthermore, the best-before date of that knowledge expires promptly in these rapidly changing times: one cannot address his or her child in the same ways as one's parents did. So the efforts of the government and the educational world to provide everybody with expert based parenting support and advice seems legitimate. Parents nowadays more and more rely on the findings of scientific research to answer their questions on education, and according to the already mentioned Dr. Adriaenssens, that is the big challenge of today:

There is a lot of knowledge in the world, but with the public this often is limited to the basic ABC. And then those parents coming to the one-hour consult, have to grasp everything we've learned in a long academic training (Adriaenssens, 2006).

It is clear that one can start none too soon with the necessary transfer of knowledge of the psy-sciences. How soon *soon* is, one can learn for example by looking at the *attainment targets* as they are officially formulated by the Flemish Education Department (Roelands &

Druine, 2000: 79): for example, the three to six year old are supposed to be “able to speak about feelings such as joy, fear, sorrow, and surprise”^[iii]. Pedagogical methods developed for teachers operationalise this in terms of teaching the children “a more differentiated vocabulary concerning emotions”, in order to “express feelings in a more appropriate way” (Kog et al., 1997). It is important not to miss what exactly this boils down to: namely, teachers of the nursing school introduce the toddlers in nothing else but the Elementary Psychology of Feelings. What we learn those young children to adopt is the academic gaze of Descartes and La Mettrie. And here *Child Psychology* is indispensable, not as psychology of the child but exactly as psychology for the child. The mainstream idea in child psychology that there are four feelings (one can be “afraid, happy, angry or sad”^[iv]) is the *theoretical* lesson that in the whole Dutch speaking education world is taught to the children for them to *talk about behavior* as it is commonly put. In their introduction to *A box full of feelings* Kog et al. thus claim that working with the four basic feelings happiness, fear, anger and sadness enables children to “recognize emotions in themselves, accept them, name them and have a more differentiated awareness of them” (Kog et al. 1997). Compared to this prefab communication, there seems to be more life implied in the “Just wait and see, you still have to learn a lot!”, one of the sentences Dr. Adriaenssens wants to knock out of us. But let us not be guided too much by nostalgia for pre-psychologizing or pre-Enlightenment times. Note that this nostalgia is also to be found in the psychologizing discourse itself: where the psy-expert tries to restore the lost mythical ideal relationship between parents and children supposedly under fire in these rapidly changing post-modern times. The nostalgia on both sides envision the same thing: a return to simple man and simple life. So the surprising conclusion is that under the naturalistic claim *it is all brain activity* there lurks a nostalgic imagery of man getting in touch with his real self and his real emotions. For example the educational box of Kog et al. aims to “help children remain or get in touch with their inner world of feelings” (Kog et al., 1997). In terms of Dr. Adriaenssens it is formulated in this way: “Every child is entitled to *sniffing parents*”, newspeak by which he means that children have a natural right to “parents who truly are attentive to their children” (Adriaenssens, 2003). In this way a soft-spoken idealized and thus ideological image on man and society is the stowaway of the brain talk. Put differently, contemporary mainstream psy-discourses amount to a theoretical instruction with a strong moralizing undertow.

With Dr. Adriaenssens the infantilizing and paternalizing aspects of this become very clear. He says: “do not hesitate to show your vulnerability but remember that the brain of your teenager is slowly attaining full development.” Adriaenssens concurs that the brain of an adolescent is “a simmering and bubbling laboratory”, easily becoming unbalanced, but it is alright, thus he assures, “if your child thinks you are a worrying squirrel” (Adriaenssens, 2006). It looks that the language of the expert, if not infantilizing, is deliberately kept utterly simple because the parent is expected to parrot these phrases: *I know your head is pretty much a simmering and bubbling laboratory but I am sure you don’t mind me being a worrying squirrel....* As said higher, Adriaenssens often explicitly gives us our lines, when your thirteen years old son or daughter claims the right to have a night out, according to the doctor you can still reply with: “I think you’re still too young, I wouldn’t feel comfortable if you would go to that party”. The quite enervating old-times *don’t-say-this-but-say-that* seems to have found a last resort in the psy-discourse. To quote the doctor once again: “Don’t say: ‘Look at your niece, she’s playing nice’, but say ‘that is not so nice, but the way you were playing a while ago was very good’” (Adriaenssens, 2003). The average psy will of course deny he is giving readymade recipes, claiming in the contrary that he is enabling his or her *client* to find it out for himself. As Adriaenssens suggests: “Trust yourself. We the experts can only pass over our knowledge, you as the parents

actually have to substantiate it” (Adriaenssens, 2003). The whole idea is that the psy does not give guidelines but only points the way to scientific knowledge where the layman can pick what suits him. Maybe this is the reason why the neo-paternalism of the psy-expert does not meet much resistance, it reasserts modern man as departing from the academic gaze to ground his experience of himself and the world. As the scientist of your own life, you are shown the way by your senior experts, the latter always insisting on your own academic capacities: be your own expert, be your own psychologist.

But what is the effect of everybody being his own psychologist? Milan Kundera once wrote that contemporary graphomania, made possible by modern technology, leads to a devaluation of writing. So if psychology becomes everyone’s business, would that mean the end of psychology? But rather than psychology as a science would disappear, it seems that the psychic dimension as such is in jeopardy. A brief historical outline: one can argue that the first broad psychologization wave departed from the renewed academic psychology in the beginning of the 20th century which, in the wake of the success of psychoanalysis, claimed a psychological explanation for things until then not analysed within a psychological framework – or not analysed at all^[v]. This colonisation lead to a pan-psychologization: nothing could escape the field of fire of psychology. And where everything is psychological, the concept threatens to loose its sharpness and even every significance. In this way we can understand how the pan-psychologization shifted in its opposite, where all the human under the sun is now being understood in a narrow biological and neurological framework (see also: De Vos, 2008). Strange as it may seem, the mainstream psychologist today does not *believe* in the psyche, but in the gnome, the neurotransmitters and the heritage of our past as hunters-collectors: the rest are believe to be stories. Novelist psychoanalysis definitely has had its time: so no more complex theorem’s like narcissism, polymorph-perverse sexuality or the death-drive: today man is entitled to a more down to earth self-image. Thus for the contemporary psy, man and world are fairly simple things: ADHD for example is a disturbance in the stimuli management in the brain, the remedy is medication, psycho-education and empowering of the network. Depression? A problem with neurotransmitters, the remedy: medication, psycho-education and empowering of the network. In short: life itself is a biological disturbance which asks for medication, psycho-education and empowering of the network. The rest are stories. One should be careful not to wave all this aside as a caricature: of course biological and neurological research is far more complicated and a lot of the psychological academic theories are more nuanced, but it suffices to look at the majority of practices in everyday psycho-social praxis and education to know which models are the hegemonic ones and influence and shape policies (on attainment targets for example)^[vi]. Those models are invariably so transparent and perspicuous that they tend to obfuscate human reality and thus seem to realize Saramago’s already mentioned dictum *we will know less and less what is a human being*.

Summarized: the contemporary mainstream psy-praxis boils down to theoretical instruction which can be characterized as moralizing and paternalizing and which leads to a paradoxical de-psychologization. The further paradox is that the more the psychic dimension as such shrivels away, the more the action radius of the psy expands. In the morning paper the psy explains the human aspect of a vast array of subjects, in the weekly magazines he is there to give us advice on work, love and education, on the television screen he shows that he is also a man of flesh and blood and that he is willing to descend from the academic tower to engage in *psychotainment*. Moreover, leaving your house you find people talking about *educational skills* on the tramway, your boss signs you up for a course on burn-out, your mother-in-law believes in *positive assertivity*: so you should

consider yourself lucky when your bedroom is not yet being spooked by the psy-discourse.

The haunting

Are we haunted by Academia? Let us take the liberty to introduce here a very useful Freudian term: *das Unheimliche*, translated in English as *the uncanny*. Freud writes: “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long-familiar (Freud, 1955 [1919]), which is a powerful formulation, almost capable to invoke in itself the very phenomenon! In a very productive reading, Mladen Dolar historicizes the concept of the uncanny, pointing out that modernity engendered specific forms of the *uncanny*. For Dolar, the uncanny in pre-modern societies was largely covered by the sacred and the untouchable, and it is only in modernity that the uncanny became “uncanny in the strict sense” (Dolar, 1991: 7). The Gothic literature and its romantic aftermath were a privileged place for that modern uncanny. Dolar also points to the endeavour of La Mettrie: erasing the difference between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* made the *automaton* appear not only in the body, but also in the spirit. This dimension of the zero degree of subjectivity returns, for example, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. For Dolar, the creature stands for the missing link between nature and culture, the point where the spiritual would directly spring from the material (Dolar, 1991). Thus, in Dolar’s reading, the uncanny, and our being haunted by it, is a structural and integral part of modernity and of Academia.

But if modern literature had its ghost stories, then what about so-called *post-modernity*? Reading Bret Easton Ellis or Paul Auster, it seems that late-modernity has its own particular horror stories. The question then is what happens with the zero degree of subjectivity that Dolar situated in the heart of the modern uncanny? And, as we will see, late modernity does not bring something new in a structural way—post-modernity is, maybe above all, the place where the full consequences of modernity can be read.

Let us depart from the fact that the late-modern ghost story does not only lack a consistent plot in which everything eventually is explained and makes sense, it is also often difficult to pinpoint what exactly engenders the horror effect. This is for example the case with Bret Easton Ellis’ *Lunar Park*. It is basically a semi and pseudo-autobiographical novel about a writer being haunted by, on the one hand, his own fictional creations from his former novels (Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*), and on the other hand, by ghostly reminiscences from the past (especially concerning the death of his father). There are certain Stephen King-like elements: a copy-cat killer, a psychic detective, or a stuffed bird-like toy coming alive, but they are not really responsible for the chilling and creepy atmosphere. Take for example, the demonic bird-toy, it is sometimes hard to take the figure seriously (at some point one can not escape the similarity with the famous Monty Python’s Killer Rabbit^[vii]). Furthermore, Ellis seems to give us rather obvious clues to understand his use of these classical horror elements. Concerning the bird-toy, for example, he explains at a given point that Terby spelled backward is “Y [why] Bret.”

The writer thus, seems to invite us into a symbolic and hermeneutic reading. Knowing for example that the protagonist bought the doll for his stepdaughter to gain her confidence, the bird-toy seems directly connected to the protagonist’s attempt to be a good father, which is obviously the central theme in the novel. But does not Ellis actually lure us into this easy, psychologizing interpretation? Ellis’ game might exactly be to force *Lunar Park* upon us as a *Bildungsroman*, portraying the protagonist’s psychological growth to full maturity and his final assumption of the father role. Various clues for this kind of psychological explanation

are spread throughout the novel. It starts with an epigraph from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—thus opening the whole ghost-father theme—to which then rather obvious references are made throughout the novel (Fortinbras Mall, Osric Motel). But having paved the way for a psychological analysis, Ellis eventually whistles us back: in the end, Terby disappears into the anus of the family Golden Retriever. Ellis seems to ask: *well, what do you think this says about my identity crisis?*

Of course, one could continue and draw upon anal-birth themes and things like that, but it might be more fruitful to pursue the more Derridean path of hauntology. For as Colin Davis argues, in the perspective of Derrida, the ghost's secret is not a puzzle to be solved, it is rather, the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past (Davis, 2005). Moreover, the writings of Ellis themselves push us in that direction. As Berthold Schoene contends, instead of the classical reassurance of familial constellations in the figure of the serial killer, Ellis only offers us estrangement, “foreclosing any more detailed psychological or psychoanalytic profiling” (Schoene, 2008: 381)^[viii]. Also, Carla Freccero remarks that it was exactly this lack of a psychologized narrative of origins that upset Ellis' critics. But what both Schoene and Freccero seem to miss is that maybe Ellis is, exactly, drawing upon the theme of psychologization and explicitly invoking the deadlock of the psy-sciences.

At least this is clear in *Lunar Park*. Just consider the central place occupied by the psy-sciences in the novel: the postmodern habitat Ellis is depicting turns out to be thoroughly psychologized. Going to a parent/teacher night for example, the protagonist Bret and his wife are ensured that the school tends to the children's emotional needs as well as to their educational needs, and are advised to enroll both their children in a “confidence-building seminar.” That same night, they overhear a teacher telling some parents, “That could be the reason that your child may end up developing interpersonal difficulties.” They then listen to a lecture of a ‘behavioral pediatrician, who had made numerous TV appearances’, a ‘soft-spoken Canadian’ who at one point suggested a ‘Bring Your Stuffed Animal to School Day’ (a currently existing practice to raise awareness on animal cruelty). Is this not what Terby, the bird-toy, actually is about?

The soft-spoken political correctness we teach our children (in terms of the psy-sciences) imposes a utopian world free of bullying, racism, animal cruelty—in short, a perfectly balanced sterile world, which needs figures such as the total freaked-out Terby to make us reconnect with the real world. Or put differently, Terby shows us the truth about the totalitarian grip of psycho-political correctness. If Ellis' *Lunar Park* depicts the fear, the confusion and the despair of the beginning of the 21st century, then this is centrally connected to the over-organized, theoretized, and medico-rational postmodern habitat.

Maybe that is what the creepy horror stuff of *Lunar Park* is about: children, adults—up and to the dog—are on numerous cocktails of medications to perfect their behavior, and all of them have their therapy sessions. Ellis shows us the academy of everyday life; he shows us our academic pathology. The children for example, go to “rehearsal” parties organized to ensure that all the children attendees will get along and respond positively to the enrichment activities planned for the actual birthday party. At Halloween, violent costumes are forbidden at school, but when children tried to find “appropriate” costumes, everyone freaks out, after which all Halloween costumes are prohibited. The haunting, as such, is this straitjacket of the bleak world of the psy-sciences, where Terby is only the secondary bearer of the horror. When nothing can escape the stories and the overload of answers of the psycho-medical discourse, the irrational cannot assert itself other than in the form of the

haunting, of estranged horror and meaningless violence.

Conclusions

We are left with still another question: if the perimeter of academified postmodern life set out by the behavioral and neuro-biological sciences is violently breached by alienation and meaninglessness, is it not there that eventually the Freudian themes reappear? For if we return one more time to Ellis' *Lunar Park*, it seems that the author cannot but hang his depiction of the postmodern condition of man on the very Freudian father-son theme. But we should be very carefully in claiming that reality as such shows that Freud was right. It is not that current psy-sciences have it wrong and that lifting the obfuscating veils reveals psychic and social life as psychoanalysis has always assessed it. We must avoid this essentialist stance. Because, if the empiricist, neurobiological model is the overt hegemonic paradigm, then this cannot but function through the suppression of the implicit, covert framework of psychoanalysis. This is why today's mainstream Academy structurally needs its Freud and Lacan bashers: the fuel which drives them will thus never dry up, for it is an internal Freudian fire which consumes them. Is it in this way that we can understand the return of psychoanalytical themes? As the return of the repressed, a return of narratives? For it seems that in the same way as the killer from *American Psycho* returns in *Lunar Park* to haunt the writer, psychoanalysis returns and comes to haunt the medicalized and psychologized comfort of our academic pathologies. So in a way *Lunar Park* is about what it means to be a father, but then it has to be put in this way: it is about what it means to be a father, being a postmodern, full blown, Academic Subject inhabiting a space saturated with psychological and psychoanalytical discursive scraps. However, formulated this way, it seems that there still has to envisaged something superseding all these narratives, in this case, being a father. In this way, do not the things of life, birth, sexuality, becoming a father or a mother, death... are connected to the zero-level of subjectivity, the asymptotic zero level of meanings and stories which came to lay bare when modern man turned the gaze inwards? And here one has to make a stance, one has to choose – for not choosing and thinking one can be on top of all the stories is the post-modern lure par excellence which eventually leads back to the mainstream discourses and mainstream Academia. Our choice will be already clear: for us psychoanalysis offers the best account to approach the zero level of subjectivity, both at the level of theory, as at the level of the psycho-social praxis. It is furthermore maybe only via the *awry gaze* of psychoanalysis that the abyss of meaning and the deadlock of the academic stories become actually visible, it is only in that perspective that the link between Academia and pathology becomes tangible.

Our argument for our choice is historical: Freudian psychoanalysis was a specific elaboration of the subject of Descartes and La Mettrie. The Freudian *skandalons* (the unconsciousness, the polymorph-perverse sexuality, the death-drive...) tried exactly to discern the Cartesian gap constitutive for human subjectivity and its inherent paradoxes. Psychoanalysis thus meant the birth of a new paradigm within the Cartesian sciences, in such a decisive way that psychoanalysis became a central point in the self-assessment of the modern subject. But if the Cartesian paradox had to be displaced by La Mettrie, also the paradoxes of the Freudian *skandalons* were to be replaced by more manageable concepts denying the abyss of modern subjectivity: a job inaugurated by the post-freudians and taken over by academic psychology. Today psychoanalysis seemed to have disappeared from the main stage, to be replaced by the academic monolithic psychology with its preferred role of the serf of neurology and biology.

This waning of psychoanalysis is taking place on the threshold of the 21st century, in the wake of the alleged end of history and of the grand narratives in politics and ideology, and

maybe this is no coincidence. Since, today's dismissal in psychology of the psyche seems closely connected with that other dismissal of a central point in the heritage of the Enlightenment: the political dimension. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the substantiation of the fundamental *Other* in politics ceased to exist. The European-American model of democracy became not only the sole player but rapidly wanted to get rid of its ideological garb. Fused with market capitalism, the western model came to understand itself as something near to the normal, natural state of affairs. In this way politics evacuated the element of ideological choices and became reduced to the art of expert administration, or as Žižek contends, it became politics without politics (Žižek, 2004). The political space opened up by modernity thus threatens to be closed down. Descartes' idea of the *res extensa* entailed the paradigmatic disclosing of a space where God was not involved, God's place was reduced to the keystone of the Cartesian dualism. This desecrating of the world made science as well as modern politics possible. *Res extensa* thus came to harbour two things: the birth of the autonomous State, and the autonomous Individual (yet in the Cartesian perspective both against the background of respectively God's Empire and the Soul). The conceptions of both State and Individual were closely connected to each other: no State without the autonomous Individual (the principle of democracy) and no Individual without the autonomous State (the rule of Law). Modernity thus created the psycho-political subject. In today's bio-politics however any *beyond* seems lost, Descartes' idea to ground the reality *sub sole* transcendently with God's Empire and the Soul, is left behind. Academia is our sole space and covers our whole reality. In pre-modernity the reflexive gaze was incorporated and bound within a religious discourse (God knew all your thoughts), in modernity this position shifted to science and to knowledge. And where Academia renounced every transcendentalism, the State and the Individual were thus reduced to units (identical to themselves) to be managed by academic and expert ways of handling things. Furthermore the falling away of a concrete other side of Western democracy seemed to have made the circle round. What we now witness is the return of the beyond: the transcendent God and Soul of Descartes return in the terrorist and fundamentalist threats – within the paradigms of hauntology.

So maybe we have to reinvent *res extensa*, departing from reopening the impossible Cartesian gap. We have to think beyond Academia, we have to reinvent politics and the psycho-political subject, we have to reinvent psychology, we have to reinvent psychoanalysis: we have to think again the zero level of subjectivity. If not, the obverse of our Academic truth and conceit will again and again resurface and breach through the school walls of our Academy of Everyday Life. It will left us bewildered and horrified, as if we would witness a stuffed bird penetrating the anus of a dog.

Notes

[i] A similar academic expert on education, widely known with the public is, for example, Robert Winston in the UK.

[ii] For more on this see: From La Mettrie's Voluptuous Man Machine to The Perverse Core of Psychology (De Vos, 2009).

[iii] Source:

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/dvo/english/corecurriculum/nursery/nurserydutch.htm> (text in English).

[iv] Source:

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/DVO/english/corecurriculum/nursery/nurseryenviron.htm>
(text in English).

[v] The history of psychology is characterized by subsequent rebirths. The term psychology itself saw light in the renaissance with Rudolf Goclenius (1547-1628). But it is only with the psychophysics of Fechner in the 19th century that psychology claimed an independent position within the *hard sciences*. The next big rebirth can be situated after the impact of the Freudian movement, which necessitated a repositioning of the psy-sciences.

[vi] If the spin-offs and simplifications of a theory turn out to be downright un-
emancipatory, should we not be led to question the fundamentals of the theory itself?

[vii] See the entry on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit_of_Caerbannog

[viii] Schoene nevertheless seems to try to save the psychological gaze: drawing upon the neurobiological trope of autism he argues that classic male subjectivity now under fire in post-modernity displays similarities to Asperger's Syndrome and high-functioning autism.

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